

Be aware of customs, courtesies when exploring Korea

The spring and summer months mark an increase in people arriving to Kunsan. As guests of the Republic of Korea, it is extremely important to have an understanding of the host country and its people. Contained below are tips to interact with Koreans in any professional or personal situation. A few cultural points to keep in mind:

Work Ethic – Koreans have a strong work ethic. Koreans are a very proud people who have made unparalleled progress in rebuilding their country from the Japanese colonial period and the ashes of the Korean War. The Republic of Korea is a fully industrialized economy racing into the Information Age, along with the industrialized western nations.

Language – Koreans are proud of their alphabet, known as Hangul. Do not confuse it with their spoken language — “Korean” or “Han Gung Mal”. Easy to learn, Hangul has greatly contributed to Korea’s high literacy rate. One can learn the alphabet in as little as three days, which can drastically simplify your navigation challenges.

Manners – Be polite and formal. Koreans will usually find a way to work with you or find flexibility for you when you’re in a bind, if you are sincere.

Courtesy – Shake hands with two hands, leading with your right hand. Place your left hand behind your right wrist but forward of your right elbow — it’s meant to show respect. You will notice a slight bow as Koreans shake hands — the more junior the person, the more pronounced the bow in deference to the senior person, either in grade, position, or age. Koreans don’t expect overpowering handshakes. You will notice Koreans present and receive gifts and pay at the register with two hands, as this also shows respect and appreciation.

Respect – It is important to address Koreans by their title and family name. For example, say Colonel Baik or Colonel So. Do not use first names, unless a close relationship is established. Expect personal questions about yourself, including your age, marital status, names and ages of your children, previous assignments and income. Discussing income, while inappropriate in the U.S., is not viewed as such in Korea.

Business – Koreans use business cards just as Americans do. When you receive a business card from a Korean, read the business card presented to you upon receipt. Immediately filing away business cards in your pocket or wallet is considered rude. Here are some other tips to make your experience in Korea more enjoyable:

Political views – Avoid sharing political views, yet keep up with Korea’s overall political situation.

Cultural habits – Avoid American cultural habits Koreans find objectionable. Don’t presume to clap your Korean friend on the back, grab their arm or otherwise touch a Korean. Conversely, after you have developed rapport with a Korean friend, expect the Korean make physical contact, probably on the knee or thigh when seated. Don’t be offended. This normal Korean behavior is an expression of brotherly affection.

Profanity – Avoid swearing and crude language. Many English profanities are used in Korean and understood by all Koreans. But they can have much stronger connotations for Koreans than for native English speakers.

Gifts – Koreans frequently give gifts. Anticipate a need to provide your visitor a gift or memento. This is especially true if it is the individual’s first visit to your organization. Coins, coffee mugs, and unit ball-caps are acceptable gifts. If a gift is wrapped, don’t open in public unless the giver prompts you to open the present. You can build very strong bonds with gifts during the holidays such as Chusok (Fall), Christmas, and Lunar New Year (Winter around early February). Liquor, western wine, fruit baskets, or other package sets are commonly given.

Alcohol – Drinking alcohol is very popular. Expect to participate in a few social toasts before getting into business. Do not pour your own drink. Koreans pour for the “elder” of the group first. Do not drink from the bottle, even beer. Get a glass. Know your limit or avoid it altogether.

Social custom – Koreans take off their shoes in their homes and in restaurants and quite often sit on the floor. Don’t be caught with socks with holes in them. Koreans do not do separate checks or tabs, as we routinely do. If you host someone for a meal, they will feel obligated to reciprocate.

Meetings – During office calls or meetings ensure that you offer a beverage to your counterpart. Tea, orange juice or coffee is acceptable. Do not fill the glass or cup to the brim. This is considered rude.

Interpreters – When using interpreters use a person who knows not only the language but also the subject area involved. Second, go over any difficult technical terminology with the interpreter in advance. Don’t confront your interpreter with surprises if they can be avoided. Always maintain eye contact with the host or guest rather than the interpreter.

General tips

Don’t write the names of living Koreans, to include your counterparts, in red ink. Red ink denotes being deceased and carries a criminal and communist connotation.

Don’t play “steal the child’s nose,” as this is considered a gesture as obscene as an extended middle finger in America.

Don’t beckon someone using the index finger. Koreans use their index finger only when beckoning animals.

Don’t lick your fingers while eating in official or formal situations and don’t ridicule Korean food. Most people come to love it by the end of their tour.

Don’t be arrogant. Don’t litter, break the law, or think Status of Forces Agreement allows you to get away with anything.

Don’t run without a shirt on or be in public without a shirt on. Don’t chew gum in a social situation.

Korean expressions

Good morning, good afternoon, evening or hello.

Ahn-nyong-hah-se-yo

Ahn-nyong = good, well

How are you doing?

Auh-dduh-kae jee-neh-sae-yo?

I am fine.

Jahl ji-nae-yo.

Jahl=fine, good

What is your name?

Tang-shin Iru-mun Muwo-shim-ni-ka?

It is nice to meet you.

Man-na-so Pan-kap-sum-ni-da

Happy/glad to meet you.

Man-na-so Ban-gap-sup-ni-da

My name is ().

Juh-neun=My

()=your name

eim-ni-dah=ending

Goodbye (When you are leaving)

Ahn-nyong-he gae-se-yo

Ahn-nyong=good, well

Goodbye. (when the other person is leaving)

Ahn-nyong-he gah-se-yo

So long!

An-nyong-he

Happy Birthday!

Seng-il-ul Chuk-ha-ham-ni-da

Basic expressions

Thank you.

Gahm-sah-hahm-ni-dah

Gahm-sah=thanks

Thank you very much.

Te-dan-hi Kam-sa-ham-ni-da

Your welcome.

Chon-man-hae-yo

Excuse me.

Shil-lae-hahm-ni-dah

Shil-lae=excuse

How much is this?

E-guh auhl-mah-ye-yo?

E-guh=this

Where is the public telephone?

Gong-joong juhn-hwa auh-di-eet-suh-

yo?

Goong-juong juhn-hwa=public telephone

What time is it?

Myut-shi-ye-yo

Myut-shi=what time

Help

Do-wah-ju-seh-yo

Phrases used in restaurants

Calling the waiter/waitress to order food

Ju-moon bah-duh-se-yo

Please give me water

Muhl joo-se-yo

Muhl=water

Give me the bill please

Gae-sahn-suh ju-se-yo

Gae-sahn-suh=bill, check

May I have kimchee, cola, hamburger

Kim-chi Chu-sip-si-yo

Cola Chu-sip-si-yo

Hamburger Chu-sip-si-yo

Food items

Beef = soh-go-gi

Chicken = daak-go-gi

Lamb = yang

Fish = saeng-suhn

Pork = daeji-go-gi

Veal = sohng-ah-ji

Ham = daeji-go-gi (same as pork)

Broil = goo-yee

Boil = zimm

Fry = tee-gheem

Vegetable = chae-soh

Salad = sa-la-dh

Bread = baang

Rice = ba-ap

Potato = gam-ja

Chocolate = cho-co-raet

Dessert = hoo-sik

Coffee = co-pee

Tea = chah

Milk = woo-yu

Beer = maek-joo

Purified water =mool

Introducing Numbers

Sino-Korean numbers

One	il
Two	ee
Three	sahm
Four	sah
Five	oh
Six	yook
Seven	chil
Eight	pahl
Nine	gu
Ten	sheeb
Eleven	sheeb-il
Twelve	sheeb-ee
Twenty	ee-sheeb
Thirty	sahm-sheeb
Forty	sah-sheeb
Fifty	oh-sheeb
Sixty	yook-sheeb
Seventy	chil-sheeb
Eighty	pahl-sheeb
Ninety	gu-sheeb
Hundred	baek
Thousand	chun
10,000	mahn
100,000	sheeb-mahn

(Courtesy of USFK Public Affairs)